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Adult Fans of Comic Books: What They Get Out of Reading

**By increasing the ranges
of texts available for use in
the classroom, teachers can
spark students' interest in
reading and learning.**

Stergios Botzakis

When people think of comic-book readers, they typically get a vision of a stunted person who lives in his parents' basement and spends countless hours arguing the minutiae of his particular popular culture interests (see Figure 1). Contemporary writings about comic books often contain infantilizing words such as *Pow!*, *Bam!*, or *Zap!* in their titles (e.g., Eggers, 2000), sound effects made popular in the 1960s Batman television program. Such depictions are emblematic of how comic books have been regarded in the United States for four decades. At best, they have been seen as a childish diversion and, at worst, as texts that deaden intellect and moral reasoning, linked with juvenile delinquency and a host of other social ills surrounding young people (Wertham, 1953). Although perhaps not regarded in such draconian terms currently, comic books are still often regarded as pieces of juvenile, junk culture (Wright, 2001).

Despite gradations of taste, comic books have remained popular to a wide range of people, from the adult males in their twenties and thirties who typically make up the superhero comic audience to the growing number of manga (Japanese comic books) readers that includes adolescents, especially girls (Glazer, 2005). Educators have recognized both the artful complexities of these texts and their growing popularity among students, and have developed programs and practices to use them to foster learning and engagement (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Jacobs, 2007; Newkirk, 2005). This growing attention being paid to comic books and graphic novels compelled me to undertake this study, in which I explored the roles these texts have played in the lives of self-identified adults who read comic books in terms of their academic and social development. Put simply, what uses did they get out of reading comic books, and why should educators care?

Purpose of the Study

The current study was an exploration of how readers used popular culture texts, extending from the works of cultural theorists like Jenkins (1992), who

Figure 1 Advertisement Postcard From Local Comic Store



researched television and movie fans. A number of educational researchers have examined lifelong reading in qualitative terms, focusing on diverse populations in the United States and abroad (Alvermann, 2001; Finders, 1997; Guerra & Farr, 2002; Knobel, 1999; Moje, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Young, Dillon, & Moje, 2002). With their examinations of how various people navigated their social worlds, these studies revolved around the lives of adolescents and students, but their findings are pertinent to literate practices as the definition of what separates adolescent from adult becomes more fluid and ill-defined (Lesko, 2001). Additionally, the increased attention to what constitutes literacy for adults, as well as the sheer multitude of manners in which it is acquired and practiced (Brandt, 2001), points to “the distinctive individuality of each participant and of his or her approach to the

cultural universe” (Mackey, 2007). One consequence of this sheer multiplicity of literacy practices is that they often “jump [their] tracks” (Brandt, 2001) and go off into unintended, unique directions.

I studied these comic-book readers because they were a group who seemed to be emblematic of having made these jumps by virtue of their choice of reading materials. What is more, they have engaged in a specific literacy community for an extended period of time; overall, typical comic-book readers have been identified as being in their mid-twenties (Chee, 2004; Fetto, 2001; Tankel & Murphy, 1998). These readers were participating in the practice of lifelong reading, choosing to read a medium that sometimes brought censure into their lives. Some comic-book reading adults felt “a sense of separation from others because of their involvement in a hobby that’s supposedly for

Individuals are capable of finding ways to navigate their worlds by using texts, objects, and situations to their advantage.

younger people” (Pustz, 1999, p. 107) because of a misconception that comic books are solely for children. I investigated how these adults used reading in their lives. Comic-book reading is an example of the out-of-school activities that “enrich our definitions of literacy” (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 44), pushing the theoretical boundaries of what constitutes literacy. This study has implications for literacy

practices of broader populations, such as insights into how lifelong reading practices evolve, how people interact with others in textual communities, and how people use texts in the course of their lives.

Theoretical Framework

Reading here is defined as a practice that is socially and ideologically situated (Street, 1995). As such, it is intimately tied up in people’s “arts of existence” (Foucault, 1984/1985), as have been practiced for millennia in western culture. Reading has long been promoted as part of the regimen for producing sound minds and sound bodies, as the transferring of information and development of mental acuity have been involved in the development of an able and informed citizenry. In this conception, reading is very much related to identity, and how reading comes to be practiced is an important part of one’s “identity kit” (Gee, 1996).

At the same time, however, reading practices are not just accepted indiscriminately from authoritative institutions. Individuals are capable of finding ways to navigate their worlds by using texts, objects, and situations to their advantage. Foucault (1975/1979) acknowledged that institutions discipline individuals but that individuals could find spaces to gain their own advantages. de Certeau (1984) referred to such actions as tactics, and he detailed how reading is an activity that encourages people to “poach” (p. 174) ideas or beliefs from texts and use them to gain advantages. Jenkins (1992) applied this concept of poaching in his study of media fans and found that texts are often used in ways that their producers do not intend. Media fans write alternate versions of stories, form

social networks, mobilize activism, or explore personal, political, and philosophical matters through their interactions with television and movies. This study similarly explores what uses adults who read comic books poach from the texts they choose to read. My research questions are (a) Why do people read when it isn’t required of them? and (b) How have their reading choices affected their lives socially and academically?

Research Methodology

Using a combination of purposeful sampling and snowballing (Patton, 2002), I recruited participants from local comic-book stores and from recruits’ acquaintances. Participants for this study ranged in age from 26 to 37 years old. In total, I selected 12 people for this study. Eleven were self-identified Caucasian males, and the one female participant identified herself as Asian American. All of these participants had been reading comic books, some on and off, for at least 17 years.

Data collection centered on interviews, field notes, a researcher’s log, and artifacts (postcards, comic-book images, written notes) collected from my participants. I analyzed their interview data using Kvale’s (1996) meaning interpretation method, where the researcher worked from a “theoretical stance, recontextualizing what [was] said in a specific conceptual context” (p. 201). This research project was an example of poaching where I took ideas, theories, and practices from the variety of texts and used them to analyze the statements in an interview. Using discursive practices such as arts of existence (Foucault, 1984/1985) and strategies and tactics (de Certeau, 1984) to examine the links between utterances (Bakhtin, 1986), I connected the reading practices of adults who read comic books to larger conceptions of literacy.

Participants

Although I collected a vast amount of data from 12 participants, for the purposes of this manuscript, I focus on 4, Aaron, Kyle, Peter, and Roger (all pseudonyms), to show how reading was involved in their lives. These four participants’ comments about their reading practices were representative of attitudes that the other participants expressed in their interviews.

Aaron. Aaron was about to begin completing his undergraduate degree in cultural anthropology at the time of our initial interview. He was a 37-year-old, married father of one. Aaron had a Middle Eastern background, but he identified as Caucasian. In the past he had worked as a Web designer and a cook. Aaron's interests included watching Asian movies, playing role-playing games, playing computer games, reading, cooking, and playing with his child. Aaron's reading interests ranged across a number of texts, including magazines, manga, online comic books, fiction, histories, science and anthropology books, and role-playing game books.

Kyle. Kyle was a single, 29-year-old European American. He had been a police detective who earned an undergraduate degree in psychology and criminal justice, and at the time of the initial interview, he was employed as an assets protection specialist at a local department store. By the time of the second interview, he had switched occupations and was employed as a property manager. He described himself as an avid reader of comic books and longer works of literature. As a side occupation, he was involved in customizing and collecting action figures and other toys.

Peter. Peter was employed as a prep cook at a local restaurant. He was a single, 29-year-old European American. Peter's reading interests were mostly tied up in shorter texts like comic books, newspapers, and magazines. He surrounded himself with reading material in his apartment and workplace. Aside from collecting comic books, he also described himself as a collector of toys and action figures. Peter belonged to a trivia team and a dart throwing league, and he also said that he watched baseball games and movies frequently. Additionally, in his spare time he played role-playing video games.

Roger. Roger was a 31-year-old, single European American who worked as a clerk, splitting time between a local comic-book store and a record store. He had achieved a degree in fine arts and taught a biweekly class on drawing and cartooning to adolescents at a local community art center. Roger described himself as someone who enjoyed reading, preferring shorter texts like comic books. He also enjoyed watching movies and television shows such as *Lost*.

In the four sections that follow, I examine different functions reading performed for Aaron, Kyle, Peter, and Roger.

Reading as Study

Looking forward to completing his undergraduate degree and moving into graduate work, Aaron foresaw an opportunity to link his in- and out-of-school reading behaviors.

Interviewer: Did you ever bring your outside reading into your school reading?

Aaron: I fully expect, when I go back into school actually, I 100% expect if I study what I want to be studying, cultural anthropology, in grad school, that comic books will be [included in my academic reading], because one of the things I am interested in is how we view Japan. And basically, what people I know about Japan, we know about Japan from manga, anime, and movies. Pop culture, that's what we know. I've read a few novels, and maybe a few other people have read novels, but really we don't know much else about, I mean, that's how we know about Japan, the culture, about how people live. But that's something I want to study is how, I'm learning this thing, I'm learning about Chinese culture that way, or expatriate Chinese culture, because almost all of the things, the comics, the movies, and the novels that I am reading now are from post-1949 China. So they are from Taiwan and Hong Kong and Singapore, and they are from places where the Chinese who did not become the communist Chinese went to live.

Aaron attributed reading in a variety of contexts as a large part of his learning. In describing his past reading practices, Aaron said that "when I was reading a whole lot, it was my escape, my protection place," but more recently he added, "It plays the role of, I guess, teacher maybe, mostly now." His description

pointed to a more authoritative role of texts, and the learning he described took place both inside and outside of school contexts. "I kind of read where my interests are going," Aaron told me, explaining that on his own he studied Japanese and Chinese cultures through reading manga, watching anime and kung fu films, and studying historical and anthropological works, as well as novels from and about those cultures. His conceptions of reading and texts dovetailed with those of Jenkins's (1992) views about media texts in that a number of different media types were conflated. For Aaron, reading was described as an intertextual activity, involving a variety of texts and a variety of media. Reading was intertwined with a number of other activities; it was part of a larger conglomeration of information, media, behaviors, and pastimes.

Within this conception of reader as student and text as teacher, Aaron displayed an awareness of a number of roles. "Now [being a reader's] much more, it's just part of how I process information, how I gather information, and actually even in reading things how I expel information or regurgitate information or meld different pieces of information." Reading entailed a number of different activities, combinations of being receptive, creative, and connective. Being a lifelong reader was akin to being a student who has a number of activities to perform, and outcomes shaped textual interactions. Sometimes, he found it necessary to regurgitate texts for papers and exams, but there was also a component of integrating texts together into a larger body of knowledge; Aaron described this type of reading as taking up "a large chunk of [his] cognitive power."

Reading was also an opportunity for him to usurp the authority of texts to gain his own version of authority as a scholar. Aaron described his reading as research that contributed to his perceived role as an anthropologist. He used what could be considered frivolous, popular culture readings to construct an identity as an intellectual authority, one who conversed in a circle of peers. Aaron wasn't simply reading comic books and watching movies; he was studying and analyzing cultures. He was an unaccredited academic, a consumer of texts who bended them to his purposes.

Reading as Appreciation and Ownership

Interviewer: What do you get out of reading comic books?

Kyle: Just happiness. Just joy. There is a collectible aspect to it that I like. I like picking up a book, reading it, enjoying the story, enjoying the artwork, and then having it, kind of like forever. Maybe. Maybe I'll trade it for a different story or sell it for a profit to get even more stories. There is an aspect to that I like. It's the same with toys and having a collection. I guess comics is one of the older things that people have collected. Or at least for my, for the past several generations. It's become sort of a collectible type thing, to own it for years and years and years and watch the value of it go up. And then suddenly you've got this thing that was once just a 10 cent, you know, some pulpy paper, a shiny cover and some staples, you know, two staples, and it was a dime or a quarter, and all of a sudden it's a down payment on a car. And it's, not everything's going to be like that, but there is some kind of a fascination about owning what you read. And it goes for novels as well. I like having it as well. I am not a big library guy. I don't check out a lot of books. I like to own.

Kyle's description of what he got out of reading comic books exhibited joy, aesthetic appreciation, and also a tactile pleasure of ownership. These pleasant sensations were also coupled with an eye to economic concerns, including recognition of market value and a manner of determining worth and engaging in exchanges. Kyle associated a confluence of discourses with his comic-book reading, and his descriptions spoke to his amassing wealth both in the form of positive experiences and material objects. The "collectible aspect" Kyle mentioned positioned him as a consumer who went to the market in search of specific feelings and goods. He described having a particular affinity

for Batman because of his own career training to be a detective, and this personal connection pointed to the multiple definitions of ownership his reading practices entailed.

Kyle described a source of value for comic books: how evocative particular narratives could be. Part of what Kyle described being attractive about comic books was that they gave him the chance to read “a great story,” to the point where the art in a particular comic book became “less and less important to me.” Kyle’s consumption of comic books was not merely speculating (Pustz, 1999); he was not buying comic books to appreciate in value and not to read them, although he was definitely aware of the process of appreciation and sometimes took advantage of it. He wanted to own stories that particularly touched, moved, or excited him. He was consciously thinking about buying specific comic books that he wanted to own in a form where it was easier to revisit them.

Kyle described buying individual comic books and then sometimes selling them to get those same issues in the collected form of a trade paperback. He spoke of multiple comic-book stories that he owned and had revisited on a regular basis, including *The Dark Knight Returns* (Frank Miller, 1986, DC Comics), *The Watchmen* (Alan Moore, 1986, DC Comics), *Batman: Year One* (Frank Miller, 1987, DC Comics), and *Kingdom Come* (Mark Waid, 1996, DC Comics). Kyle described himself as a reader with discerning tastes who collected a certain caliber of texts that met with his approval. Doing so, he demonstrated his own hierarchy of value and standards. He was a self-admitted snob.

Kyle used a capitalist discourse to speak about his comic-book reading. As goods that have been collected and traded “for the past several generations,” comic books have their own economy and a preexisting market. As such, collecting was tied to a tradition where value was determined by collector interest, rarity, and landmark events (Pustz, 1999). Kyle’s use of comic books was in part tied up in their status as collectible objects. What could be worthwhile about reading comic books was that sometimes they appreciated in value and could be sold to obtain other goods. For Kyle, those goods were typically other comic books, but he was also aware of

instances where certain comic books were worth amounts of money comparable to the down payment on a car. Kyle spoke about this transformation as being almost alchemical, with a small amount of base material—“pulpy paper” and “shiny staples” sold for a pittance—becoming a valuable treasure. Kyle treated texts as commodities in talking of his decisions to either keep or trade away particular comic books. His use of comic books as prized possessions was twofold; he enjoyed owning the physical items but valued the experiences he associated with a good story as well.

Reading as Friendship

Peter: Comic books are my little escape.

Interviewer: Escape from what?

Peter: I spent a long time with some severe depression. I’d lost my job, my place to live, my fiancée dumped me. You know, a lot of things had gone bad for me and then, at that time I wasn’t really collecting comics, but I started to once I got a new job and place to live, I started getting back into comics. And it kind of helped. I didn’t have that many friends or friends I wanted to associate with any more. I wanted to get out of that world of homelessness and drugs that I had fallen into. This was kind of, you know, I could remember I used to collect comic books when I was younger and it made me feel good. The characters are still there. I can still go. I can still get an X-Men comic. I can still go and get Batman. You know, they are old friends and they’re still there. It’s not that I think that they’re my friends or anything, but they’re a constant, you know, knowing I’m, that I have to go to work every morning, Tuesday, knowing that it’s just one of those things.

Escape has been a recurrent feature in the descriptions of why people engage in reading (Nell, 1988; Radway, 1991). Escapism has been a negative term associated with solipsism, but as Nell (1988) observed,

escaping through reading could also be a reflective act that affected social behaviors and attitudes. Peter's description of escapism contained features of both oblivion and reflection.

Peter's description of reading seemed therapeutic in the same vein that some adolescent readers find genre fiction (Reeves, 2004). Reading comic books was an escape from present grim realities into a fantasy realm, and in his case pleasant sensations from the past. Comic books helped him cope when he was reeling from major life events. The pattern of comic-book publication also created a regularity that helped give his life structure. Just as Tuesdays were regular days of work for him, he could say that Wednesdays, the days that new comic books were put on the stands, were part of his routines. Comic books were dependable, like good friends who were there for him when he needed help or to relax. Even though Peter was sure to note that he was not totally divorcing himself from reality, that he knew comic books were not really friends, he did note that comic books functioned like friends did for him. They provided him with support and also relief from thinking about his troubles.

As constants, comic books contributed to how Peter was restructuring his life, but they did not simply serve as a reliving of the past: They allowed for some reflection, rehearsal, and vicarious experience. Peter's use of comic-book reading acted in part as an "organizing fantasy" (Jones, 2002) for him, giving him some material to make sense of and navigate his social world. Peter noted that "comic books have grown up with me. You know, Peter Parker started out as a teenager, then he went to college, he got married. He was progressing along with his readers." The continuous narrative of the comic book ran parallel to his life, providing Peter with a fictional account of what growing up and going through life changes was like. This affinity came into play when he chose his pseudonym, a reference to Spider-Man's alter ego Peter Parker. Spider-Man, for him, was a type of fictional friend, someone with whom he could identify.

Reading as Search for Meaning

Interviewer: Do you ever get comments from people because you read comic books?

Roger: No, not any more. It's weird because I, at a certain age, I remember in middle school, when I became particularly conscious of the desire to kiss girls, and I want girls in my bedroom, I want girls around my stuff. But, if, you know, they see my comics, they're going to be out of there, because I realized early on that girls do not like comics. Or at least, American girls do not like superhero comics. Not in the 80s. American girls seem to like manga comics now just fine. So, I, again, I spent whatever years being Batman's agent in S____, promoting Batman. DC never sent me the check for that, go figure. *[both laugh]* So, then I realized that, wait a minute, I am OK to hang with my neighbor's kid brother, but the older neighbor wants to start tongue kissing boys and somehow I'm not on that list. Well, that sucks. Maybe this comic thing is coming between me and the French kissing, so I instructed all my friends, all the little brothers, OK, any girls ever ask if I collect comics, tell them no. I keep thinking of Jesus being denied. *[both laugh]* *[affects voice]* Do you know who Jesus is? No, no. *[waves hands]* Do you know who Spider-Man is? No, no. *[waves hands]* *[laughs]* Um, so I denied it for a while, and then I realized that I was never going to kiss a girl and I might as well enjoy my comic.

This utterance was full of discursive references, pointing to how much reading was linked into different aspects of Roger's life. Literate behavior has a number of dimensions here, among them gender roles, consumerism, and maturity. Further, Roger's utterance contained religious discourses, including a reference to spreading a "gospel" (of Batman) as well as an echo of a Biblical passage. Roger's dramatized denial of reading Spider-Man comic books echoed the story about the disciple Peter's denial of Jesus from Matthew 26:70–71. This use was tactical (de Certeau, 1984) in that Roger used a low culture text, a comic

book, to stand in for one of the most culturally central texts in the western world. Spider-Man was used to stand in for Jesus, showing how that comic book was used in as instructive a manner as the Bible. Via joking, Roger subverted typical hierarchies of value to the point where a commonly denigrated text became equivalent to the Text of western civilization.

Religious discourse was also taken up when Roger described the proselytizing role he assumed earlier in his life when he acted as “Batman’s agent” and tried to get anyone who would listen to him to read superhero comic books. He also saw Stan Lee, the creator of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, as a sort of prophet or instructor. At another point in the interview, he spoke of receiving “kind of instructions” from what he read, as Spider-Man’s adventures held moral messages for him. He cited one particular story where Spider-Man was trapped under a tremendous wreckage of machinery, and he said that he found inspiration in

Spider-Man willing to, finding the inner strength to lift a massive crushing weight on top of him that technically he is not strong enough to lift, but he finds the inner reserve to do it, because he runs down the list of everyone he’s ever let down and everyone that’s depending on him, and he can’t fail. Because he has to rise at this moment.

The scene Roger cited resembled that of the Biblical story of Samson, who found great strength when he had none, although he relied on his faith in God whereas Spider-Man found his strength from his social obligations and from within. This scene was typical of Lee’s writing in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, which was frequently moral and aphoristic, with statements such as “with great power, comes great responsibility.” Roger was aware of the “secret messages” imbedded in texts, his term for ideas or scenes that were particularly meaningful to him.

Experiencing meaningful sensations was one of the reasons he gave for reading, and he described being critical and reflective about such messages. He stated that “some part of me is still searching for the pieces that will make the rest of the pieces of my life work. And, as superstitious as that sounds, that happens.” Like de Certeau’s (1984) poacher, Roger read texts looking for usable parts, and comic-book stories were as viable an option for him as literary or religious

texts. He was searching for existential answers from texts, particularly comic books, but like Spider-Man he also looked within himself to operationalize his found knowledge.

What Did They Get Out of Reading?

The participants in this study discussed a number of roles reading held for them, ranging from leisure reading to more intense, reflective practices. For some, reading was a temporary shelter from worries, a companion when lonely, or a mirror that allowed them to view themselves and the world differently. Using reading as focal practices (Sumara, 1996), my participants were achieving outcomes such as expertise, connoisseurship, mental development, or enlightenment. Their behaviors transcend the nerd-in-the-basement stereotype attributed to adults who read comic books, but because of the texts being read, such reading practices have often been conflated with unauthorized, even “renegade” activities (Worthy, 1998).

However, when Aaron, Kyle, Peter, and Roger read to do research, enrich their lives, or find meaning, they were taking part in mental exercises that have been valorized by various institutions for millennia as being part of a balanced “arts of existence” (Foucault, 1984/1985) in the western world. Their reading practices provide evidence of meaningful uses for popular culture texts that might be taken up by educators or researchers working with students using graphic novels or comic books. This potential has been embodied in part by the recent move for the inclusion of popular culture, including graphic novels, which are extended works that use the sequential art style that originated in comic books (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Jacobs, 2007; Morrell, 2004; Xu, 2005; Yang, 2008).

Why Should Teachers Care?

The current study contributes to this popular culture movement with voices of people who are not literacy experts or educators speaking about how they have used these texts in their lives. Even though they did not involve themselves in literacy education by trade, they did describe meaningful interactions with texts that they derived on their own. What is more, these

participants have developed their textual interactions over a number of years, and their descriptions cast a portrait of how those reading practices develop over a lifespan. Even when reading texts typically held in low regard, they were able to explore themselves and their relationships with their worlds. If nothing else, these readers' descriptions of their literacy practices lend more credence to the roles of choice and interest in reading (Allen, 1995; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Education research has suggested that regular and frequent engagement in reading has positive effects on learning and scholastic performance (Brozo, 2002; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004), and my participants described conditions that fostered such engagement. With the potential limitations of the texts and activities in school, opportunities to capitalize on interest and choice may be few.

When the definition of legitimate text becomes limited, educators also limit what students might be able to access that could spark their interests and become the impetus for lifelong learning. Increasing the ranges of texts available for student use, including comic books and graphic novels, may address this situation. However, inclusion of texts such as comic books does not necessarily guarantee school success. As students, my participants ran the gamut, from "nerds" who "got all As" like Kyle, to students like Aaron who had experienced some academic failures, to others who lost interest in school and "more or less sat it out."

This variety among readers suggests that we should examine ourselves, our students, and what people do with texts before we start ascribing certain activities and functions to those texts. Comic books may not be a silver bullet, but used mindfully, with an eye to students and their contexts, they may be powerful resources for sparking student interest and learning.

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